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## GADGETS

# A Week With MyFoodPhone

**Our Reporter Snaps Photos of Meals, Gets Online Feedback from Dietitian**

By **SARA SCHAEFER MUÑOZ**

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

May 12, 2005

I'm usually skeptical of weight-loss programs. While I wouldn't mind shaving off a few pounds and eating more healthfully, I generally know what my shortcomings are -- I don't need an expert to tell me I should lay off the Krispy Kremes, for example.



Sara Schaefer Muñoz

Nevertheless, I recently did a week-long trial of MyFoodPhone, a diet service that has clients take pictures of what they eat and send them to a Web site where dietitians scrutinize users' eating habits and try to guide their clients toward optimal nutrition. The service isn't cheap. It normally costs \$149 a month (for a limited time, the company has reduced the monthly fee to \$99). I wanted to see if it would help me trim junk food and eat balanced meals.

Once I signed up for the service, I logged onto the [site](#), typed in my username and password, and filled out my profile. I already had a message from my registered dietitian, Amanda Gwinnup Carlson, a healthy looking blonde, welcoming me to MyFoodPhone. The service requires a camera-equipped cellphone, which I got to borrow as a reporter testing the product. Marc Onigman, a MyFoodPhone spokesman, says would-be customers must have a phone with photo-taking capabilities. ([Read](#) about other new diet services.)

I kicked off my week by taking a picture of Tuesday's lunch at Quiznos Sub: a turkey sandwich with guacamole and bacon on whole grain bread and a bottle of water, a lunch that my dietitian later called "great."

The system is very easy. Just pull out the camera phone, shoot the picture, hit a couple of buttons, and the picture is on its way. It appears a few hours later on your own private "food journal" within the Web site. For meals in which the content isn't obvious -- such as a soup or a sandwich -- I took a video of my plate and explained over the phone what it was I was about to eat. The video is sent and posted exactly the same way, though sitting down alone in a restaurant and announcing into my phone, "This is a sandwich of cheese, salami and peppers," drew some odd looks from people at a table nearby.

One drawback is that taking pictures of your food when dining in a

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**WHAT SARA ATE**

Here's a sampling of the pictures and videos Sara took of her meals and snacks, along with excerpts from comments she received from a MyFoodPhone dietitian.



Orange and granola bar  
**Comment: "Great source of Vitamin C and whole grains. Perfect snack."**



Steak, rice, salad and artichokes  
**Comment: "Your portions here are excellent!"**

[SEE VIDEO](#)



Quiznos turkey and guacamole sub with chips and water  
**Comment: "Great lean protein choice and healthy fat in the guac."**



Cheese fondue and baguette  
**Comment: "Good to see you getting some calcium."**



Chicken, rice and salad  
**Comment: "Great way to include the veggies and the protein!!!"**

[SEE VIDEO](#)

**DIETITIAN'S OVERVIEW**



[SEE MESSAGE](#)

One of the weekly video messages from Sara's dietitian.

group naturally invites questions, which makes the system impractical for people who would prefer to keep their weight-loss goals to themselves. Another hitch is that shared meals make portion sizes difficult to accurately record. When I snapped a picture of a cut-up baguette before my husband and I dove into a pot of cheese fondue, I wasn't sure how much of it I was going to eat. Once I had eaten my portion, well, I couldn't take a picture of it. However, users can always go to the site and type in explanatory notes below their pictures, or post a meal that includes no picture at all. I did that once when I didn't have my phone during a breakfast of a bagel and a muffin (and was secretly relieved my dietitian didn't see the size of that muffin).

As the week wore on, it became clear that the training manual for the nutritionist must have



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been heavy on a single message: Be Positive! Though I posted coffee cake, hot chocolate, half a container of chocolate covered espresso beans, and after one dinner, a cup of ice cream and a chocolate mini-cake, she didn't utter a word of criticism. After the sizable pot of fondue and the half of a baguette, the feedback was simply "Good to see you getting some calcium."

The suggestions she did make, however, were helpful. She mentioned that because I am still breastfeeding my baby I should be getting more protein, which made me more likely to reach for low-fat yogurt or nuts as a snack. She also pointed out that I should eat more frequently – every two-and-a-half to three hours – instead of going long stretches without food, a habit of mine.

Dietitians will give users feedback once a week at the minimum, and will respond to emailed questions by users within 36 hours, says Mr. Onigman. When I had trouble saving food descriptions I had typed in, my dietitian immediately contacted technical support and the problem was resolved in a day.

After about a week, dietitians give users a visual depiction of their eating habits through "dashboard dials," which resemble speedometers for different food groups. My fruit "speedometer" sent a simple message at a glance: Eat More -- something easy to remember that I try to do when price and convenience permit.

MyFoodPhone is more convenient than a traditional food journal, assuming the user keeps her cellphone with her and charged, and has access to the Internet. And being able to ask specific questions of a "personal" dietitian without the hassle of in-person meetings is a nice touch. But keeping a good food journal and having a dietitian are only parts of a successful diet. The site doesn't offer recipes and has only a limited emphasis on exercise, and as with traditional food journals, the user can always cheat.

MyFoodPhone is a good bet if you are generally diligent about watching what you eat and just want encouragement, but probably won't help those who have trouble sticking with diets. Perhaps the greatest benefit of the device dawned on me when I found myself forgoing a weird but favorite snack of hot chocolate mix right from the bag. When you know someone will be seeing everything you eat, it definitely makes you think twice about what you put in your mouth.

**Write to Sara Schaefer Muñoz** at [sara.schaefer@wsj.com](mailto:sara.schaefer@wsj.com)

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